

VZCZCXRO0453
PP RUEHDBU RUEHPW
DE RUEHBUL #0942/01 1051339
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 151339Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8403
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000942

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: SHIA FAMILY LAW: DUELING DEMONSTRATIONS

REF: KABUL 914 AND PREVIOUS

11. (U) SUMMARY. Hundreds of protesters for and against the Shia Family Law engaged in a standoff on April 15 in front of a mosque and university run by Ayatollah Mohammad Asef Mohseni, a prominent supporter of the law (reftel). Supporters of the law outnumbered opponents. After roughly two hours and rising tensions between the two sides, riot police directed the anti-law faction to move their demonstration further down the street. Opponents of the law criticized the pro-law crowd for trying to incite violence, though there were no reported casualties. Charge will see Mohseni April 16 to find an Afghan solution to resolve U.S. objections to the Shia Law. Embassy will report septel on Charge's April 15 discussions with Justice Minister Danesh and Chief Justice Azimi on the Shia Family Law. End Summary.

Anti-Law Protesters Brave Security Threats

12. (SBU) Lower House MP Sabrina Sageb (Kabul, Tajik) and civil society groups organized the April 15 demonstration against the Shia Family Law. Sageb and her sister, both outspoken women's rights activists (and Sunni), called for "normal women" to join the protest, both in an effort to demonstrate that opposition to the law ran deeper than only among Kabul elite and to lower the profile of the law's most prominent critics, who are receiving threats from conservative Shias. Tamadun, a Mohseni-financed television station, broadcast warnings to Kabul families not to let their women attend the rally.

13. (SBU) At about 10 am on April 15, some 100-200 women marched about 500 meters from Parliament toward Mohseni's mosque and university compound, chanting "respect to women now!" MP Fawzia Koofi (Badakhshan, Tajik) also attended the rally and told PolOff, "this was something we had to do, we couldn't keep silent any longer." Although the organizers of the protest were predominately Sunni Afghan women, Koofi said she was happy to see many Shia women participate.

Pro-Law Supporters Well Prepared For Counter-Demonstration

14. (U) Scores of Afghan police lined the street in front of Mohseni's compound to separate the protesters from a much-larger counter-demonstration in favor of the law. Estimates of the size of the counter-demonstration ranged from 300-1,000 participants. Eyewitnesses described several hundred women assembled at the front of the mosque chanting slogans in favor of the law and in opposition to foreign government pressure against the law. Inside the compound, a larger group of men and women massed to support Mohseni and demand the Shia Family Law be brought into force.

15. (U) After some 90 minutes, the pro-Shia Family Law demonstrators moved closer to the road, nearing the anti-law crowd. Riot police stepped in and directed the anti-law protesters to move several hundred meters down the road. After another 30 minutes, both crowds dispersed. Later that

day, a separate rally in favor of the law took place in a different western Kabul neighborhood. Embassy received reports that some 100 demonstrators chanted pro-law slogans and threw rocks at a nearby high school.

Both Sides Digging In

¶6. (SBU) Organizers of the anti-law protest released a two-page statement listing their specific objections to provisions in the law that restrict women's rights. The group also called for the international community "to focus on providing justice in Afghanistan (in the same way that the international community is fighting against terrorism and narcotics." Proponents of the law took the opposite view on international involvement in the issue. Lower House MP Sayed Alemi Balkhi (Kabul, Hazara), a Mohseni ally, said the law's supporters could mobilize "2 million" demonstrators to protest Western involvement in Afghanistan's religious affairs if the international community did not tone down its "obstruction of the Shia community's right to its own jurisprudence."

Charge-Mohseni meeting

¶7. (SBU) The Charge has a previously-scheduled meeting with Ayatollah Mohseni on April 16. The protests will not affect our plans. The Charge plans to make clear to Mohseni the United States' strong concerns about provisions of the law that are inconsistent with the Constitution and Afghanistan's international obligations and begin a discussion on finding

KABUL 00000942 002 OF 002

an Afghan solution to resolve our mutual concerns. Embassy will report septel on Charge's separate meetings with Justice Minister Danesh and Chief Justice Azimi's meetings today on the Shia Law and other topics.
RICCIARDONE